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ABSTRACT

The work of Edward S. Curtis, who studied and recorded American Indian culture with a camera, is described in this paper. Curtis recorded on film, with explanatory text, a photo-history of eighty tribes west of the Missouri River. The role of games and their accompanying mythology was one of the salient features of Curtis's work. The general purpose of this study was to determine whether the traditional native American ball games continued to be positive culture traits of the American Indian in the early twentieth century. Four traditional ball games are described. The myths surrounding these games are related in this paper. In analyzing the work of this photo-artist, the author of the paper concludes that traditional native ball games continue to be positive culture traits of a number of native North American tribes. (JD)

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TRADITIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN BALL GAMES IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY RECORDED BY EDWARD S. CURTIS, ARTIST WITH A CAMERA

A Paper
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Traditional Native American Ball Games in the Early 20th Century
Recorded by Edward S. Curtis, Artist With a Camera

The native North American had long been the subject of the palette and brush of a number of artists including Cari Bodmer, George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, Seth Eastman, Paul Kane, and Frederick Remington. It remained for a Seattle artist, Edward S. Curtis, working with a camera, to come almost at the last moment to record the customs and character of the American Indian in all his ancient glory.

As Curtis' mentor, Theodore Roosevelt, noted,

> In Mr. Curtis we have both an artist and a learned observer,...rendering a real and great service to the world of scholarship everywhere... our generation offers the last chance for doing what Mr. Curtis has done. The Indian as he has hitherto been is on the point of passing away.[1]

Beginning in 1898 Curtis recorded on film with explanatory text a photo-history of eighty tribes west of the Missouri River. The ambitious project was not completed until 1930. The final published work, The North American Indian, extended to twenty volumes of text, each of which was accompanied by a portfolio volume of plates selected from over forty thousand negatives.

Curtis' aim was to record the cardinal points, as he called them, of Indian life of all important tribes of the United States and Alaska that still retained to a considerable degree their primitive customs and traditions. Games and pastimes were one of the twenty-five cardinal points that Curtis researched.

Problem

The general purpose of this study was to determine whether the traditional native American ball games continued to be positive culture traits of the American Indian in the early twentieth century. Specifically, the investigation was concerned with the following:

1) determining the then-current traditional ball games of western native Americans.

2) determining the geographical spread of the games among the culture areas and tribes.

3) determining the characteristics of the various games.

4) determining the presence of ball games in the then-current mythology of the tribes.

Procedure and Definitions

Data for the investigation were researched from the twenty volumes of Edward S. Curtis' The North American Indian published from 1907 to 1930.

Terms basic to the investigation were defined:

1) Ball game. A contest utilizing a ball or analogous object which was propelled toward goals at opposite ends of a field.

2) Myth. A traditional or legendary story concerning some superhuman being or some alleged person or event with or without a determinable basis of fact or natural explanation.

Results

Of the eighty tribes observed by Curtis in the early twentieth century, thirty-eight possessed traditional native American ball games as a positive trait of their culture.

Table I lists these tribes by culture area. Tribes within the Arctic, California, Great Basin, Great Plains, and Northwest Coast culture areas were most likely to have been playing such games. While some few tribes from the Southwest and Plateau areas possessed these ball games, no Sub-Arctic tribe had a traditional ball game within its game repertoire.

Four traditional ball games were being played by western native North Americans during the early twentieth century: shinny, doubleball, kickball, and carryball. Table II indicates the number of tribes possessing each ball game. Shinny and doubleball were the most common of the four games. Twenty-one tribes were playing shinny and fifteen tribes were playing doubleball. Shinny was played most extensively in California, on the Great Plains, and on the Northwest Coast. Some few tribes played the game in the Plateau and Southwest culture areas. Doubleball was played most extensively in California and had a limited exposure in the Great Basin, Great Plains, Northwest Coast, and Plateau regions.

Ten tribes played kickball. All of the tribes observed by Curtis in the Arctic and Great Basin played kickball. The only other culture area in which the game was played was California; kickball was not played by native Americans in the other five culture areas. The game, carryball, was played by only one tribe; that tribe was on the Northwest Coast.

TABLE I

NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES POSSESSING BALL GAMES

IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

FROM CURTIS' THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

Arctic	Great Basin	Northwest
Cape Prince of Wales	Mono	Chimakum
Kotzebue	Paviotso	Coast Salish
Noatak	Washo	Kwakiutl
Nunivak		Nootka
Selawek		Quilliute
	Great Plains	Tolowa
California	Arikara	Tututni
Achumawi	Cheyenne	
Cahuilla	Comanche	Plateau
Hupa	Crow	Flathead
Karok	Gros Ventre	Klamath
Maidu	Hidatsa	Wishham
Miwok	Teton Sioux	Yakima
Shasta		
Wintu		Southwest
Wiyot		Hopi
Yurok		Tewa

TABLE II

NUMBERS OF NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES

POSSESSING BALL GAMES IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

FROM CURTIS' THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

Culture Areas	Tribes Observed	Tribes Playing Ball Games	Tribes Playing Shinny	Tribes Playing Doubleball	Tribes Playing Kickball	Tribes Playing Carryball
Arctic	5	5	0	0	5	0
California	16	10	6	7	2	0
Great Basin	3	3	0	1	3	0
Great Plains	15	7	5	2	0	0
Northwest Coast	9	7	6	2	0	1
Plateau	13	4	2	3	0	0
Southwest	17	2	2	0	0	0
Subarctic	2	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	80	38	21	15	10	1

While there was no culture area in which all four games were played, three of the traditional ball games were played in two culture areas--California and the Northwest Coast; two were played in three culture areas--Great Basin, Great Plains, and Plateau. It might be said that in the early twentieth century if a traditional native America ball game existed in the culture area another traditional ball game also was likely to be in existance in the culture area.

Each game of ball was played with a strong degree of similarity within the culture areas although numerous variations did exist. Curtis included a somewhat complete description of the game of shinny as played by the Teton Sioux.

> (Ball bouncer) was a game of shinny played by either men or women. The ball, tanned skin stuffed with buffalo hair, was quite hard and elastic. Each player used a stick,(called a ball-bouncer), about four feet long and crooked at the end. Goals were marked by two trees or poles about twenty yards apart, and the course was as much as half a mile long. Contests were usually between bands. In all games gambling was the motive.[2]

However, the variations of various aspects of shinny were numerous among the twenty-one tribes from five culture areas which played the game. Anywhere from three to ten players competed on teams. The game was not exclusively played by one sex; in various tribes it was a man's game, a woman's game, a game played by both sexes, or a game played by men and women together. The ball generally was made of deerskin stuffed with buffalo or deer hair or it often was

a hard wooden ball. Such dissimilar balls as an eighteen inch roll of deerskin and a ball from the cartilege of a whale's fin also existed. The goals were particularly diverse; holes, single stakes, double stakes, crossed stakes, lines, double trees, neighboring mesas, or even a little three-sided stone-roofed house existed as goals. Fields ranged in length from one hundred yards to four miles. Wagering commonly accompanied the shinny game.

Doubleball traditionally was the woman's ball game where the ball was thrown with a stick. Only in California did men play the game and then it was extremely rough with few holds barred. The number of players ranged from three to twenty with larger numbers playing the game in the Plateau culture area than elsewhere. Again, villages or tribes often competed against each other. The ball generally was two short sticks united by a thong; only in the Great Plains was the ball actually two united balls. The field ranged in length from forty to three hundred yards. Wagers often were staked. Perhaps the most descriptive account of the doubleball game in Curtis was of the Wiyot game in northwest California.

> ..., the so-called stick game, was played between representatives of different villages. On each side were three players armed with sticks with a crooked end. Two pieces of heavy wood about three inches long were tied together near one end with a piece of deerskin thong. In the middle of a two hundred yard course two opposing players stood with their sticks. One held the missile between his teeth. At the word of the umpire he dropped it, and tried to toss it toward his opponent's goal. The other players in opposing

> pairs stood about halfway from the middle point to the goals; and each grasped the wrist of his opponent and held his stick between his teeth. As soon as the missile was dropped, and tossed, the pair in the center began to wrestle, and each man of the other two pairs grasped his stick in both hands, and placed it behind his opponent's back, and endeavored to bend him backward to the ground so that he himself might escape and throw the missile toward the opposite goal. Any hold was allowed, but the stick could not be grasped by an opponent. When at last one broke away from his antagonist and raced toward the missile and hurled it, his opponent leaped up and pursued him, and, if he succeeded in catching him, seized him by the waist or the leg or the neck and hurled him to the ground with all possible violence. Heavy wagers were held.[3]

Kickball was a man's game usually described as very rough with any tactics allowed. The ball was small, approximately five inches in diameter, and of deerskin stuffed with hair or grass. The goals were driven stakes either upright or at an angle to form a small triangle just large enough for the ball to slip through. The field varied in length from forty yards to one-quarter mile. Stakes were wagered.

Curtis did not include a well documented single account of the game of kickball as played in the early twentieth century; the Paviotso account best illustrates the game.

> "Ball play" was a football game in which holding, pushing, tripping, wrestling, in fact almost any tactics were permitted. The ball was small and of deerskin, and each of the goals, which were about two yards apart, was marked by two posts.[4]

Carryball was played by only one tribe, the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast, who sometimes used it as a war game.

> "Ball" is played either in the house or in a field of similar space. A ball, about the size of a football and made by simply doubling up and wrapping with cords some suitable natural, such as a small robe, is thrown into the air at the middle of the playground. The opposing sides stand grouped together and all leap to get the ball as it falls; then follows an indiscriminate struggle to force it to the end of the course and into a hole. They were permitted to kick, hold with hands or arms, beat with the fists, or throw dust into the eyes....Men have been killed at this game when used as a preparation for war.[5]

Of the scores of currently told myths Curtis included in his work, nine myths contained references to ball games, four to shinny,and five to kickball as Table III presents. All five myths denoting the game of kickball in the culture were Eskimo myths. No other tribes testified in their oral tradition to kickball as a positive trait of the culture. The Noatak Eskimo possessed three such myths: "The Giant Mouse,"[6] "The Shouter,"[7] and "The Serpent Killer".[8] In the "Giant Mouse" the third brother rescued the Big Lake people from the Giant Mouse, a monster who took one person from every canoe going by his lair and ate it. After killing the monster he stayed with the people and taught them to hunt caribou and often played kickball against them. In a similar manner Shouter sought to avenge the murderer of his sister at the hands of the evil wolf-people. Reaching their village, Shouter saw their people playing kickball. When they saw him, two men and a girl, the best athletes and runners, ran up to him. Shouter eventually married the girl runner and killed the murderer of his sister. Again, in "The Serpent Killer," a young man found hospitality

TABLE III

MYTHS IN CURTIS' THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

REFERRING TO BALL GAMES

Game	Tribe	Myth	Function of Myth
Kickball	Cape Prince of Wales	The Man Who Married a Polar Bear	Man living with Polar Bears
Kickball	Noatak	The Giant Mouse	Destruction of Evil
Kickball	Noatak	The Shouter	Avenge a Killing
Kickball	Noatak	The Serpent Killer	Destruction of Evil
Kickball	Selawek	Rescue of the Stolen Wives	Right a Wrong
Shinny	Coast Salish (Cowichan)	Kesek and the Stone-Headed People	Avenge a Killing
Shinny	Klamath	The Shinny Player of Kewet	Origin of Snipe
Shinny	Oto	The Red Ducks	Right a Wrong
Shinny	So. Cheyenne	Mad Bull Story	Origin of Buffalo for Food

among villagers who were playing kickball. While there, he learned of a man-eating serpent in an adjoining village and when he reached it he found a playground fenced off with skins where the villages lighted lamps and played games.

The Selawek "Rescue of the Stolen Wives"[9] described in some detail the game of kickball. In this myth, a brother of one of the stolen wives who had spent a great deal of time in running and practicing games of strength came to two villages where many people were playing kickball in a playground located between the two villages. A kickball contest was arranged between the two villages with the brother and one of the cruel villagers putting the ball into play. Eventually after a great struggle, the brother succeeded in kicking aside the huge man's leg and kicking the ball far down the lake. Whenever it landed he was the first to reach it. Finally he kicked the ball into the house in the village where he was guest and the game was won.

"The Man Who Married a Polar Bear,"[10] was challenged to a kickball contest by the headman of his wife's village in a Cape Prince of Wales Eskimo myth. Both sides lined up and the man kicked the ice ball over the heads of his opponents and won the game.

The four myths in Curtis denoting the presence of shinny in the culture were from the Great Plains, the Plateau, and the Northwest Coast culture areas. Both the Oto and the

Cheyenne of the Great Plains had myths in their oral tradition pertaining to shinny. In the Oto myth, "The Red Ducks,"[11] the youngest of four brothers followed a pretty red duck to its owner, a man who had lost his scalp to the son of a chief of a neighboring village. Now the chief's son wore it when he played ball. By pretending he was the chief's son, youngest brother took the scalp and began to play shinny with some other youths. He purposely hit the ball toward the fence surrounding the village and escaped returning the scalp to its rightful owner.

In a similar manner, a girl who decided to visit seven youths and live with them as a sister took her shinny ball and stick, put the shinny ball on the ground, hit it with the club and in such a manner passed over the land. This occurred in the Cheyenne myth, "Mad Bull Story."[12]

A game of shinny was the central theme in "The Shinny Player of Kewet,"[13] a Klamath myth. The young men of Kenek were always beaten at shinny by the players from down the river. One of these young men learned there was a good player on Kewet Mountain and he sent his sisters to bring the player to Kenek. Upon arriving in the village, the Kewet youth placed his dog on the shinny field between the middle and his goal; in reality the dog was like a mountain so that the opponents could not hit the ball past it. The Kenek players with the new player, Kewet, scored twice and won the game. After the game, one of the losing players sat ashamed

with head bowed and with the handle of his stick against his mouth. Suddenly he became a bird with a long beak, dodging from the view of the people. This was the first Kenek shinny-player, a kind of snipe.

A Coast Salish tribe of the Northwest Coast told a myth entitled "Kesek and the Stone-Headed People."[14] In it, Kesek avenged the killing of his father by soaring over a group of stone-headed people playing ball and clubbing their stone heads with a club strong enough to shatter rock.

Conclusion

In summary, the field research of the photo-artist Edward S. Curtis revealed that early in the twentieth century, the traditional native American ball games continued to be positive culture traits of a number of native North American tribes west of the Missouri River. At the same time the mythology of the tribes had few references to the traditional ball games of the American Indian.

Epilogue

While games and pastimes were one of the twenty-five cardinal points Curtis investigated during his thirty-some year endeavor and reported upon in the text of The North American Indian, no one of the 2200 printed plates illustrated native American traditional ball games. Wishing however to illustrate the artistry of Curtis, a number of plates have been selected for presentation. These plates

are listed in Table IV. The slides are arranged by culture area and illustrate a cardinal point of the culture as Curtis designated it, or in modern terminology, a positive culture trait.

TABLE IV

LISTING OF PRESENTED PLATES FROM CURTIS' THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

Plate Title	Tribe	Source in Curtis
Arctic		
Launching the Whale Boat	Cape Prince of Wales	S.Vol.20,Pl.707
Ready for Sealing	Nunivak	S.Vol.20,Pl.695
The Muskrat Hunter	Kotzebue	S.Vol.20,Pl.714
Boys in Kaiak	Nunivak	S.Vol.20,Pl.690
Ola	Noatak	S.Vol.20,Pl.716
Northwest Coast		
At Nootka	Nootka	S.Vol.11,Pl.396
Ready to Throw the Harpoon	Nootka	Vol.11,p.74
The Whaler	Makah	S.Vol.11,Pl.395
Nakoaktok Warrier	Kwakiutl	Vol.10,p.98
Kwakuitl House Frame	Kwakiutl	S.Vol.10,Pl.343
A Nakoaktok Chief's Daughter	Kwakiutl	S.Vol.10,Pl.334
Princess Angeline	Coast Salish	S.Vol.9,Pl.314
Evening on Puget Sound	Coast Salish	S.Vol.9,Pl.312
Plateau		
Praying to the Spirits at Crater Lake	Klamath	Vol.13,p.158
Klamath Tule Hut	Klamath	Vol.13,p.166
Salmon Fishing	Wishham	Vol.8,p.100
Pounding Fish	Wishham	Vol.8,p.94
Chief Joseph	Nez Perce	S.Vol.8,Pl.256
California		
Yurok House on Klamath River	Yurok	Vol.13,p.62
Watching for Salmon	Hupa	Vol.13,p.42
A Smoky Day at the Sugar Bowl	Hupa	S.Vol.13,Pl.471
Hupa Trout Trap	Hupa	S.Vol.13,Pl.439
Karok Baskets	Karok	S.Vol.13,Pl.438
Great Basin		
Mono House Near Independence	Mono	Vol.15,p.58
Washo Baskets	Washo	S.Vol.15,Pl.541
Southwest		
Hopi Architecture	Hopi	S.Vol.12,Pl.421
The Potter	Hopi	S.Vol.12,Pl.426
The Basket Weaver	Navaho	S.Vol.1,Pl.34

TABLE IV (con't)

LISTING OF PRESENTED PLATES FROM CURTIS' THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

Plate Title	Tribe	Source in Curtis
Great Plains		
As It Was in the Old Days	None	S.Vol.19,Pl.652
Prayer to the Mystery	Oglala Sioux	S.Vol.3,Pl.91
Blackfoot Tipis	Blackfoot	S.Vol.18,Pl.642
Fleshing a Hide	Blackfoot	S.Vol.18,Pl.643
Travelling	Gros Ventre	Vol.5,p.140
Parfleshes	Gros Ventre	Vol.5,p.112
Drying Meat	Teton Sioux	Vol.3,p.96
Gambler	Piegan	S.Vol.6,Pl.194
Yellow Owl	Mandan	S.Vol.5,Pl.143
The Spirit of the Past	Crow	S.Vol.4,Pl.122
Ready for the Charge	Crow	S.Vol.4,Pl.125
Apsaroke War-Chief	Crow	S.Vol.4,Pl.112
Story of the Waskita	Cheyenne	S.Vol.19,Pl.658

NOTES

1. Edward S. Curtis, The North American Indian (20 vols., 1907-1930; reprint New York, 1970), I, xii.
2. Ibid., III, 138.
3. Ibid., XIII, 78-79.
4. Ibid., XV, 75.
5. Ibid., X, 49.
6. Ibid., XX, 203-04.
7. Ibid., 260.
8. Ibid., 201-03.
9. Ibid., 232-35.
10. Ibid., 157-60.
11. Ibid., XIX, 166-68.
12. Ibid., 145-48.
13. Ibid., XIII, 187-88.
14. Ibid., IX, 168-69.